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SUBJECT: SUCCESSFUL WOMEN'S DAY EVENTS HELD ACROSS AFGHANISTAN

¶1. In honor of International Women's Day (IWD) on March 8, many of Afghanistan's provincial governors hosted events focused on the role of women in Afghan society. Activities included speeches by prominent politicians and women, roundtable discussions, handicraft fairs, choral performances, youth theater, and the provision of humanitarian assistance. Speakers generally highlighted themes of education, work opportunities, and legal rights and protections for women and girls. Both male and female participants emphasized the Quran's grant of rights to women, which has been perverted by some to the detriment of women, but some of the male speakers also emphasized the need to preserve the traditional role of women in the household. In many cases, attendance at events was higher than anticipated and the gatherings sparked enthusiasm and renewed commitments by participants to support opportunities for women and girls. There were no reports of violence or security incidents to mar the activities, and PRTs reported positive coverage by local media.

¶2. In Kabul, the Parliament, UNAMA, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, political parties, civic organizations, and the Embassy hosted IWD celebrations, each attended by 500-1000 women. During the Afghan Republican Party-hosted celebration, party leader Sebghatullah Sanjar spoke in support of the 8/20 election date and encouraged government negotiations with Taliban who would accept the Afghan constitution. The leader of the National Journalists Union of Afghanistan (NJUA), M. Hashem Esmatullahi, told 500 female journalists, authors, and students attending the NJUA event that independent journalists will play an essential role in guaranteeing the integrity of the electoral process. Ambassador Wood and Minister of Women's Affairs Ghazanfar spoke at the Embassy's event which also included a performance by former Afghan Star contestant, Elaha.

¶3. Highlights of the activities across the nation included:  
-- More than 600 women gathered in Uruzgan Province, and the event's opening roundtable entitled "Progress for Women is Progress for All" brought together both men and women in this highly conservative province despite earlier predictions that men would not attend the event.  
-- Large gatherings of men and women were held at different venues in Herat Province. Activities included a mix of speeches, poetry and sports contests, exhibition of crafts, Quran recitations, prayer services, and distribution of food to impoverished women and those in women's hospitals and prisons.  
-- More than 500 women gathered at the Helmand Provincial Council Hall and, in keeping with the rights granted through Islam and the Afghan Constitution, were encouraged by the Deputy Governor to seek an official Government position.  
-- Kapisa's governor Abu Baker pressed women to educate their daughters all the way through high school and railed against the practice of giving young daughters away for marriage, but tempered those comments with a more traditional message on the role of women in the home.  
-- In Badghis Province, activities were held throughout the week, to include radio interviews, an event hosted by the Governor that brought together about 150 participants, and a handicraft fair.

-- With the theme "Men and Women Uniting for Afghan Women's Rights", more than 150 women and several men in Wardak Province participated in a day of activities hosted by the Governor, to include speeches, cooking classes, and provision of humanitarian assistance.

-- Paktya Province's event brought together 200 women and about 50 men. Of note, the provincial police chief called for female volunteers to join the Afghan National Police (ANP) and some women stood up to answer the call, receiving rousing applause from the audience.

-- In Paktika Province, 112 women gathered at an event in the capital city of Sharana.

-- Approximately 300 women and 50 men gathered at a women's shura in downtown Khost City, which was a well-attended event for the conservative province.

-- Northern Provinces of Takhar and Kunduz held uncontroversial and well-attended events, which included participation by the German MFA Rep for Women's Issues in Kunduz.

WOOD